

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Hard Truth*

Service Theme: *The First Will Be Last; The Last Will Be First*

Sermon Theme: *How Do We Get In? (August 21, 2022)*
Luke 13:22-30

It was a beautiful summer evening in Appleton, WI. I was at the hot grill with a cold beer and warm sunshine, while Kelly cooked some sides in the oven. At one point, she came outside, fatefully pulling the back door shut behind her. Fatefully, because as we discovered too late, the door was locked from the inside. Inside, where our house keys were. Locked out, with the stove on, the race was on to figure out, “How do we get in?”

That’s when I spotted the small, single-hung window of our downstairs bathroom. I yanked out the screen, and discovered that the window, thankfully unlocked, could be opened from outside. Let me reiterate, this window was small! But with no other choice, I boosted Kelly up, and pushed her headfirst through the narrow opening and down onto the toilet, thus avoiding a housefire. We laugh about it now, but in the moment, “How do we get in?” was a stressful question!

And it’s a stressful question many people wrestle with today. How do we get in...through the doors of heaven? There are a few different beliefs. Some picture the doors of heaven standing wide open to everyone, like the outstretched arms of a loving, accepting God who will welcome anyone and everyone into Heaven, regardless of what they believed or how they lived. Others picture a single-file line, with Saint Peter at the gates, inspecting each individual’s life to determine whether they’ve been good enough to get in. Others picture the doors of heaven surrounded by snipers, razor wire and electric fences—an impenetrable fortress they’ll never access because of terrible things they’ve done. Are the doors of Heaven any of those? Or something completely different? And more importantly, **How Do We Get In?**

Jesus answers that question in today’s sermon text. As he preached in the towns and villages on his way to Jerusalem, a man asked him, “***Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?***” But Jesus didn’t really answer his question. Instead, he answered the question the man should have been asking. Not, “How many will get into Heaven?” but “Will I get into Heaven?”

To encourage everyone listening to personally wrestle with that more important question, Jesus described the doors of Heaven. “***Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.***” That certainly negates those who believe everyone will have a leisurely stroll into heaven. Jesus says that heaven’s door is narrow, and many won’t be able to get in!

That wouldn’t have necessarily shocked the Jews in Jesus’ audience. The Jews widely believed that every Israelite would be saved. After all, they were God’s chosen people! The descendants of father Abraham! If people wouldn’t get into heaven, it was certainly those dirty pagan Gentiles, but not them!

But Jesus’ next words must have shocked them. “***Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’***” He doesn’t say “they” will stand outside, referring to Gentiles. He says, “you,” addressing his audience that was confident the Jewish blood in their veins would save them! But Jesus warns, “***There will be weeping...and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.***” They believed Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were their ticket through the door—but Jesus tells them that if they trusted in the patriarchs to save them, they wouldn’t join them. Their heritage; their family; the group they belonged to, wouldn’t get them through the narrow door.

And it won’t get us in either. Even if your family was founding members who helped build the church. Even if your name is on the church membership rolls. Even if you’re the citizen of a supposedly

Christian nation. Even if you belong to a political party whose principles often align with Judeo-Christian morality, or a political party whose principles often focus on caring for the poor or for foreigners, like Jesus encourages. The door to heaven is narrow—too narrow to fit through if you’re trying to get in by clinging to your family crest, or your membership certificate, or your American flag, or your campaign yard signs. Those things aren’t bad or wrong. But they won’t get you into Heaven.

But if their bloodline couldn’t get them into Heaven, the Jews thought they had another card up their sleeve. They were confident of their salvation because of their obedience. They followed the rules; they offered the sacrifices; they went to the Temple; they celebrated the feasts; they obeyed the Sabbath laws; they were so good they even concocted extra laws to show how super obedient they were!

But Jesus, speaking as the voice of the man behind the locked door, says, ***“I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!”*** Literally, he calls them “workers of unrighteousness.” Because they were going through the motions, but not with their hearts. That certainly negates those who think a long list of good works will get them past St. Peter!

And there are plenty of people who think that way—that living a good life is your ticket in. Some prescribe to the ladder method—believing that by perform enough kind acts and good works, they’ll climb the rungs right into Heaven. How many funerals have you attended where the focus was, “He was such a good man”? Others prescribe to the scales method-- confessing their sins, but believing that as long as they can do enough good to balance out their bad, God will be satisfied and let them in. Then there are others who prescribe to the comparison method-- confessing their sins, but thinking, “At least I’m better than those people!” But the door to heaven is narrow—too narrow to fit through if you’re clinging to your ladder, or your scales, or if your bloated ego head is held high while you look down on others.

Those methods don’t work, because God’s expectation isn’t, “Be pretty good,” or “Be better than others.” God commands, ***“Be perfect,***

as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Even just one sin shuts the door, making it impossible for sinners like us to get through the doors by our works. It would be like taking three people to the beach-- a world-class Olympian, a guy who swims laps every week at the Y, and someone who can’t swim at all--and telling them to swim to Portugal. One will drown immediately, one will make it a little further before drowning, and the other might go an impressive distance before drowning. But...they all still die!

A believer with a strong, mature faith might live a holier life than an unbeliever, or a brand-new Christian, but if you believe your good works get you into heaven, you’ll still die eternally. As Paul writes in Galatians, ***“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”*** The door to Heaven is narrow—too narrow to get through if you’re still dragging the load of your sins, or if you’re trying to heft a big bag of good works over your shoulder.

That’s why Jesus tells his audience, ***“Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.”*** The Bible is filled with people who seem like they’d be the last people to get into heaven, but do. Like Rahab, the foreign prostitute. Or the thief on the cross. Or even people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, if you read through the Biblical accounts of their sinful flaws and messed-up families, sometimes wonder, “Who’s the hero here?” And the Bible is filled with people who, at least outwardly, seem like they’d be the first people to get into heaven, but are locked out, pleading too late to get in. Like the “righteous,” “obedient” Pharisees and teachers of the law. Or Judas, the disciple of Jesus. Or the other Jews, God’s chosen people who relied on their heritage and works to get them to Heaven.

So are those who picture the gates of Heaven as an impenetrable fortress right? There’s just no way for unworthy sinners like us to possibly get in? Yes, and no. It is impossible for unworthy sinners still carrying the load of their sin to make it through that narrow door. And yet, Jesus can say, ***“People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of***

God.” And that even imperfect sinners like **“Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets... will be...in the kingdom of God.”**

How? Because of a small detail that probably went unnoticed when I read the text earlier. **“Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem.”** What happened when Jesus got to Jerusalem? There, the Son of God, who wasn’t just “pretty good” or “better than others” but who perfectly kept the law God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai, climbed up another hill called Calvary. And there, suffering the agony of hell on a cross, he bore the load of every sin of the entire world.

Unworthy sinners can’t get through the narrow door hauling their sins with them. But Jesus Christ, your perfect substitute, has removed that load from your shoulders, and destroyed it. So, Jesus didn’t just make it possible for us to work our way through through the Narrow Door—he IS the door! It is only through faith in him as Savior that we enter eternal life!

And through faith that Jesus has removed your load of guilt; through faith, worked in our hearts as a gift from God by the Holy Spirit’s power through our Baptism, or through hearing God’s Word, we have the proper posture for entering through a narrow door. You have to get small!

Martin Luther once said, **“It is faith, which makes a person small; yes, even makes them into nothing at all, so that he must despair of all his works, and cling only to Christ, and let go of all things besides him.”** In faith-produced spiritual humility, we drop to our knees and beat our breasts, confessing, **“Lord have mercy on me, a sinner.”** In humble admission that we can’t get ourselves through the door, we can stop clinging to our works, or our groups, or everything else that makes us too puffed up to make it through, and in humble, confident faith, cling only to him who picks us up off our knees, and leads us through the door!

That gives a whole new meaning to Jesus’ phrase, **“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door.”** Literally, he says we need to

“struggle.” The Greek word for fighting against strong opposition in an arena or ring. But because we know Jesus is the door, and the only way to get in, he isn’t telling us we need to struggle to do enough to get in. Jesus has already won that battle! Rather, we need to struggle against our spiritual enemies—Satan, this sinful world, and our own sinful nature, who try to pull us away from Christ.

Through the power God gives us through Word and Sacrament, we fight those battles and struggle...to do nothing! Struggle to let Jesus bring you through the door, instead of insisting or thinking we can get in by clinging to anything else! Struggle not to do more—but to let everything else go, and trust only in Christ!

That beautiful summer day in Appleton had nothing on the final, most beautiful day, when we’ll join with believers from every corner of the earth, who trusted in Jesus to get them through, streaming into the **“city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,”** its gates thrown wide open for all those who trust in Christ. No need to squeeze through a window. Because we get in...through Jesus!